

A SHORT TREATISE ON READING ALOUD.

BY ERNEST LEGOUVÉ.

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PART II.—CHAPTER II.

READING CONSIDERED AS A MEANS OF CRITICISM.

After a long conversation, in which I had expressed my ideas on this subject to him, Mr. de St. Beuve said to me, "At that rate, a good reader should be an able critic."

"Without doubt, and the remark has more truth in it than you imagine. For in what consists the reader's talent? In correct interpretation of the works he reads, in order to which he must first of all understand them. But the surprising part of it is this. It is his endeavour to rightly interpret, which aids him to understand; for reading aloud gives a power of analysis which we can never attain to by merely reading to ourselves."

Mr. de St. Beuve asked for a few examples. I quoted Racine's academical speech on Corneille. This discourse is famous amongst men of letters. It contains one marvellous passage: the comparison of the state of the Théâtre Français before and after Corneille's time. I had often read this passage to myself and admired it; but one day, upon trying to read it aloud, I was prevented by the unexpected difficulty I found in so doing. I was surprised, and began to consider the passage attentively. The second part seemed to me to be heavy, and almost impossible to render—as if harnessed to La Fontaine's famous coach. This part consists of a period of seventeen lines, which seventeen lines form one single sentence! One sentence, without any rests! No full stops! No colons! Not even a semi-colon! Nothing but commas, with interwoven

incidences which succeed one another and reappear at each turn of the sentence, prolonging it just as you think it is finished and obliging you to follow breathlessly all its endless sinuosities. I finished the piece panting, but pensive. "Why," said I to myself, "did Racine write such a long and laboriously-turned sentence?" Instinctively my eye fell on the first part of the piece. What did I see? A complete contrast! Seven sentences in nine lines! Notes of exclamation everywhere! Not a single verb! A disjointed, dismembered style! Everything in fragments, in tatters! With an exclamation of delight the answer flashed upon me. Wishing to describe the two different states of the drama, Racine had done more than describe them. He had painted them.

In order to delineate what he himself called the chaos of the drama, he wrote in an abrupt, violent style, without art, without modulation. In order to give a vivid picture of the drama as created by Corneille, he displayed a long sentence, where everything was connected and smooth, where all was harmony and unanimity. With this new thread in my hand to guide me, I took the piece, and read it over again.

I know of nothing more difficult, and consequently more useful, than to safely reach the end of this terrible period of seventeen lines without once resting on the way, without appearing tired, indicating by your intonation that the sentence is not yet completed, so as to allow of its developing itself in all its majestic amplitude and flexibility! My studies as a reader were very useful to me that day, and I gave twofold thanks to an art which, after having assisted me in understanding this beautiful piece, had enabled me to interpret it in a manner worthy of it.

CHAPTER III.

ON READING POETRY.

How must poetry be read? To judge by the system followed, even in theatres, the great art of reading poetry is to make the audience think it is prose. One day I was present in a theatre where a drama was being performed. In a box near me were two elegantly attired ladies. Suddenly, one of them said to the other, "Why, my dear, it is actually poetry!"

Whereupon they got up and went away. All I can say is, that it was not the actor's fault that they had found it out. He had done his best to hide the monster: he had disjointed, dismembered, and dislocated the verses so well that the lines, as spoken by him, reminded me of Hippolyte in Théramène's narrative:

"The dead hero left in my arms a corpse so much disfigured that his own father would not have known him."

Amateurs naturally exaggerate what is done by artists, and for a very good reason. One cannot know what one has not learnt, and very few people think that there is anything to be learnt on the subject of reading.

I never hear verses read in public without being surprised at the number of different ways there are of reading badly! A few, on the plea of harmony, think it necessary to surround them with a sort of unctuous flourish, which rounds off the verses, blunts all the outlines, oils all the springs, and gives you a faint, sick feeling, like that produced by the swallowing of a mucilaginous liquid. Others, on the plea of truth, do not trouble themselves about rhythm, or rhyme, or prosody; and when, unluckily, they chance to recollect that the cæsura occurs in the sixth foot, they say, quite calmly,

"Mon esprit est malpropre (cæsura) aux speculations"

(My mind is unfitted [pause] for speculation).

Let me present in opposition to these extraordinary errors three absolute maxims, the correctness of which I shall exhibit to you by quoting examples.

I. That the art of reading is never so difficult as when it is applied to poetry, and long study alone will enable you to apply it properly.

II. That poetry should be read as poetry, and poets should be interpreted poetically.

III. That the interpreter of a poet becomes also his confidant, and to him is revealed what is hidden to others.

A single individual will suffice to demonstrate the truth of these three axioms—viz., La Fontaine.

But here I must give a few details which are not so much digressions as a safer and pleasanter way of attaining our object.

I first began to read in La Fontaine: my master was a very clever man, almost too clever, who had a charming voice, which

he managed very well, an expressive face which he managed too well; and who gave me two kinds of lessons, both equally useful, and which will be as useful to you as they were to me: he taught me what a reader should do and also what he should not do.

One day, when he was going to read some of La Fontaine's fables at a literary meeting at the Conservatoire (amongst others the fable of the Oak and the Reed), he said to me:

"Come and hear me read, and you will learn how a reader who knows his business should present himself to his audience. I shall begin by glancing round the room: this fugitive glance ought to be agreeable, amiable, and accompanied by the slightest of smiles: its object is to collect, so to speak, the sympathies of the audience, and to bring all eyes to bear upon you: then, you should make a little noise with your throat thus, hem! hem! as if you were about to begin: but you do not begin immediately. No; you wait till silence is completely established; then you stretch out your arm, the right arm, curving it gracefully at the elbow. The elbow is the soul of the arm. Attention being fixed, you announce the title. You say it quite naturally, without any attempt at effect, for you are just then playing the part of a mere advertisement: 'The Oak and the Reed.' Then you begin 'The Oak.' Here the voice must be sonorous, the sound majestic: a noble and somewhat emphatic gesture. You are describing a giant whose head is in the clouds and whose feet rest in the kingdom of the dead:—

"The oak one day said to the reed."

"When you utter the word 'reed' use hardly any voice. Dwarf the poor plant by your intonation, despise it, throw it a glance over your shoulder quite low down on the ground, as if you could only just distinguish it in the distance."

You laugh, and you are right to do so; of course it is funny. It is even ridiculous. And yet the principle of it is perfectly correct and true. It is true that you must not begin speaking directly you appear before your auditors; it is true that you must enter into communication with them by means of your glance; it is true that the title must be pronounced clearly and simply; it is strictly true that the sound must represent and describe the different characters; and if you can do all this without affectation or exaggeration, the result will be a very excellent and useful lesson, especially as regards La Fontaine.